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Tight money may ground shuttle complex

By Sue McMillin
Gazette Telegraph

The budget ax is once again hanging over the proposed military shuttle-control center, and its proponents were scrambling Friday to determine if the entire program is in jeopardy.

The Shuttle Operations and Planning Complex has been scrutinized almost continually since the

Air Force decided to build the Consolidated Space Operations Center east of Colorado Springs. CSOC, completed more than a year ago, also houses military satellite-control centers.

Sources said tight budgets and a stalled space-shuttle program have added fuel to earlier concerns that the shuttle complex is unnecessary. Critics say the center will needlessly duplicate the Johnson Space

Center's mission-control complex in Houston.

Defense planners have argued that the shuttle complex is needed for security reasons and to provide back-up to Johnson.

The completed complex would employ about 900 people, mostly Air Force personnel.

The project's funding has not been decided in the fiscal 1988 budget now being completed by the

Pentagon, said Air Force and U.S. Space Command officials on Friday.

About \$25 million was earmarked for the program in the approved 1987 budget.

"There's a lot of speculation on defense programs right now," said Lt. Cmdr. Doug Schamp, a space command spokesman. "It's that time of year. There's a lot of discussion going on."

An Air Force spokesman in the Pentagon said he could neither confirm nor deny any attempts to cut the shuttle complex from the budget. The budget will be disclosed when President Reagan presents it to Congress in early January.

U.S. Rep. Ken Kramer, R-Colo., and Sen.-elect Tim Wirth, D-Colo., both expressed concern Friday about possible cuts in the program.

"It's being debated within that five-sided building again," Kramer said wearily. "It's a continuing process with a high-value project that is not far enough along that it can't be scrapped."

"There's been no final decision, but there's a lot of difficulties there. If they don't put it in the budget, it's in tremendous trouble."

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Shuttle: Pentagon debates need for complex

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Kramer said he wants to coordinate closely with Joel Hefley, who will replace him in the 5th Congressional District next month, to provide continuity in the fight for the shuttle complex.

Hefley could not be reached Friday for comment.

Kramer fought diligently in 1985 to get the shuttle complex back in the budget after it was cut by the Air Force. Weeks of political haggling ended when the Air Force put a scaled-down version of the center in its 1987 budget.

Rather than a \$500 million center with a shuttle simulator and astronaut training facilities, the Air Force budgeted only for a \$300 million complex. The simulator

and mission training and planning facilities were eliminated.

Wirth released a brief statement Friday, pledging to scrutinize the Pentagon's plans for the project.

"When the president's budget is released, we'll need to examine the shuttle center proposal in terms of its military merits and cost-effectiveness," he said. "In the meantime, my staff and I are beginning immediately to talk to administration and Air Force officials in Washington and Colorado to pin down the center's future."

Kramer said that if the project remains in the budget, he expects Congress also to take a tough look at it.

After the Jan. 28 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger brought the shuttle program to a

standstill, Congress began to question the military shuttle program.

The House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee is investigating the need for the military shuttle complex, and its report is expected early next year, congressional committee staff members said.

There is concern within Congress and the administration that the complex won't be needed by the early 1990s, as was anticipated before the Challenger disaster — and may not be needed at all if the direction of the space program changes significantly.

The shuttle won't be launched again before early 1988, and the number of planned missions has been reduced. So the Air Force has put its new shuttle launch facility at Vandenberg Air Force Base,

Calif., in mothballs. The first launch from that pad was scheduled for last summer.

The Air Force also renewed its push for more unmanned launch vehicles to reduce its reliance on the shuttle.

Meanwhile, the CSOC space reserved for the shuttle complex will be used for a test facility for the Strategic Defense Initiative, a proposed space-based, defense system against ballistic missiles.

The Defense Department plans to eventually construct a separate building beside CSOC for the test facility.

The facility, to evaluate computer hardware and software, will be the center of a national system of scattered SDI experiments and testing facilities.